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THE INFLUENCE OF KEATS UPON THE EARLY POETRY OF TENNYSON

It is most unusual to find a unanimity in the voice of criticism with respect to any detail of a poet's life or art; but, singular to relate, this phenomenon, rarer in occurrence than the discovery of a new astral system, may be observed in connection with a study of Tennyson. For there does not seem to have been made any noteworthy dissent from the generally accepted belief that Tennyson, in his youth, was a disciple of Keats; that from "the pure, the blushful Hippocrene" of Keats' verse he imbibed divine inspiration, and that the witchery of his epithets, the consummate perfection of his form, and the exquisite melody of his verse, were due, in large part, to a loving and diligent study of the works of his ill-fated predecessor.

Ever since the poems of Tennyson were wrangled over by reviewers and lampooned by critics, the names of Tennyson and Keats have been inseparably connected in the minds of those who cherish real poetry as a sacred possession. In one of the earliest reviews, by Lockhart, of the volume containing "The Lady of Shalott," Tennyson is pronounced to be "a new prodigy of genius, another and brighter star of that galaxy or milky way of poetry of which the lamented Keats was the harbinger." Amongst later critics, F. M. Owen says: "When one fully understands the invention and imagination of 'Hyperion,' one begins to appreciate how incalculable was Tennyson's debt to Keats." Mr. Arthur Waugh believes that Tennyson's early poems "combined with Wordsworth's sympathy with the countryside, a richness of variety and melody which may have been due to the influence of Keats." Finally, Dr. Henry Van Dyke considers Tennyson to be "moving on the same lines that Keats had begun to follow," and he adds that "he was going beyond his leader." These references to the influence of the one poet upon the other might easily be multiplied; the few that I have given, however, suffice for the purposes of this essay, and serve, satisfactorily enough, to indicate the trend of critical opinion on the subject under discussion.

According to the biographer, Waugh, Tennyson made his first acquaintance with the poems of Keats during his residence at Cambridge. He seems to have read both the Odes and the Tales with particular enthusiasm and to have entertained for them a "special affection." Whatever the period in which Tennyson first saw these achievements of a kindred spirit and whatever the emotions with which he may have regarded them, it is certain that the "Poems, Chiefly Lyrical," published in 1830, as well as all those written before 1843, show distinct traces of the influence of Keats; and, while we cannot deny that they are characterized by marked originality of treatment, we must not be blind to the fact that much of their charm results from a power of vivid description of scenery, a mastery of picturesque delineation of objects, and a skill in sound suggestion by means of words harmoniously modulated, which Keats enjoyed to a degree none since Milton could boast of, and which he seemed to have bequeathed, like another Elijah, to his youthful successor. I shall endeavor, therefore, to point out to what extent the influence of Keats may be discerned in the writings of the Victorian Laureate, and to show how this influence affected the diction, metre and rhythm of Tennyson, how it spurred him on towards the attainment of a more perfect form, and how it modified his choice and treatment of theme.

Soon after the publication of his earliest productions, Keats fell captive to the sway of Milton's organ music, and thenceforth he pondered in his heart the favorite maxim of the Puritan bard that "poetry should be simple, sensuous and impassioned." Of the sensuous and impassioned qualities of Keats' work it is not necessary now to speak. The simplicity of his poetry, however, is, in many of his pieces, marred by a serious fault. Keats had a passion for fine sounding language, and a delight in the use of epithets—of the kind best denoted by the German word, *schwärmerisch*—which he often carried to an extreme. This exuberance in expression, which is so marked in Keats (and which the Cockney would perhaps term "high-falutin"), quickly caught Tennyson's fancy and led him, almost in his earliest poems, to emulate his master in the over-luxuriant use of epithets and fine words. There is a singular resemblance between the class of epithets

which most frequently recur in the works of the two poets. Of that group which Mr. Robert Bridges calls "languid," the following, occurring continually in Keats, appear also on almost every page of Tennyson—silvery, sweet, pure, black, white, old, young, high, low, mild, dainty, fretful and blessed. There are words like flitting, floating, swimming, panting, melting, whirling, circling, shrilling; brooding words, such as dark, lone, doleful, forlorn, weary, sole, deep and woeful; purely descriptive words, such as silken, sheeny, shady, shadowy; and verbs like bill, moan, fret, float, light, lap, hoard, wane, wind, echo and girdle. If we tabulate the names of those objects which Keats most repeatedly mentions, we shall be astonished to find how many of them Tennyson as repeatedly refers to. Bell, dew, moon, silver, gold, moss, nest, oak, thicket, grot, bee, sunbeam and moon, are a few examples of this extremely numerous class of words.

It may be argued that the words I have named are peculiarly adaptable to the exigencies of poetry, and that they may be found in the vocabularies of a hundred and one "wielders of poetic measures." This is true enough. The words selected have indeed a decidedly poetic ring; and more than one poet has certainly availed himself of their beauty; but the point is that they do not elsewhere play as important a role as with Keats, nor is their use so recklessly abused by any previous writer. Must not this strikingly frequent recurrence of certain epithets have attracted the curious gaze of Tennyson, close and eagle-eyed student that he was? And is there not reason in assuming that Tennyson should be impressed with the charm, the vigor and the especial fitness of these words; should garner them into the granary of his capacious mind; and employ them when the occasion offered? This, at least, appears to be a satisfactory explanation of the fact that Tennyson indulges in the excessive use of certain words which were characteristic of the diction of Keats. Thus, the word "silver" (or its derivatives), is a term with which Keats ever delights to conjure up effective landscape pictures. In four successive poems of Tennyson the following uses of it are found:

And silver-smiling Venus ere she fell
Would often loiter in her balmy blue.

Down from the central fountain's flow—
 Fell silver-chiming—
 Many a fall.

 Till I came
 Upon the rear of a procession, curving round
 The silver-sheeted bay.

Six columns, three on either side,
 Pure silver.

And the silvery marish flowers that throng
 The desolate creeks.

In the poems before 1843, "silver" and "silvery" are mentioned no less than twenty-eight times, nor does Tennyson fail to make an equally lavish use of the other words above referred to.

Interesting evidence is furnished by Tennyson's use of compound words, in such descriptive phrases as, "light-glooming brow," "sudden-curved frown," and "golden-netted smile." This peculiarity of the Laureate, which often, as in "Margaret," amounted to a tiresome mannerism, might well be a reminiscence of Keats, with whom this species of epithet enjoyed an equally immoderate favor. Thus, the "Endymion" abounds in such phrases as, "sweet-lipp'd ladies," "hemlock-breeding moistures," "dew-dabbled poppies," and "ebon-tipped flutes." A list containing a number of compound epithets selected indiscriminately from the works of the two poets would be effective in showing the marked similarity displayed in their choice of words. Such a list might contain:

droop-headed flowers,	dull-twanging bow,
dainty-woful sympathies,	ever-fleeting music,
westward-winding flood,	mild-minded melancholy,
light-footed damsels,	emerald-colored water,
large-eyed wonder,	moon-beamy air,
wind-scattered surf,	star-cheering voice,
down-lapsing thought,	evening-lighted wood,
faint-heard hymning,	ever-shifting currents,
ever-changing tale,	silver-throated eels,
black-hooded forms,	barge-laden streams.

Tennyson is justly famed for the magic of his descriptive power, for the vividness, the living color and the accuracy of detail

with which he presents scene after scene of a glorious landscape. It was in the school of Keats, however, that he appears to have learnt this wonderful art. The following description by Tennyson sounds like an echo from "Endymion":

The semi-circle
Of dark blue waters and the narrow fringe
Of curving beach—its wreaths of dripping green—
Its pale pink shells—the summer-house aloft
That opened on the pines with doors of glass,
A mountain nest—the pleasure boat that rack'd
Light-green with its own shadow—keel to keel
Upon the dappled dimplings of the wave,
That blanch'd upon its side.

And this description from "Calidore:"

The lonely turret, shattered and outworn,
Stands venerably proud; too proud to mourn
Its long lost grandeur; fig trees grow around,
Aye dropping their hard fruit upon the ground.
The little chapel with the cross above
Upholding wreaths of ivy; the white dove,
That on the window spread his feathers light,
And seems from purple clouds to wing its flight.
Green tufted islands casting their soft shades,
Across the lake; sequestered leafy glades—

will serve to show how closely Tennyson's method was allied to Keats' skill, and how well the Victorian had learnt from his forerunner the marvelous art of condensing into two sententious yet magnificent lines a complete scene from nature.

The ability to clothe in both a concrete and poetic garment pure abstractions like time and distance is a gift which has never been bestowed on any but an imaginative genius of the highest order. That Keats enjoyed this truly rare power in an eminent degree, these beautiful lines eloquently attest:

And now, as deep into a wood as we
Might mark a lynx's eye, there glimmered light,
Fair faces, and a rush of garments white.

There she stood,
About a young bird's flutter from the wood.

Nor will a bee buzz round two swelling peaches,
 Before the point of his light shallop reaches
 Those marble steps that through the waters dip.

Tennyson has, on various occasions, imitated Keats in an attempt to materialize abstract conceptions, but the greatest success did not always crown his endeavors. As fair specimens of Tennyson's efforts may be noted:

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
 He rode between the barley sheaves.

a gilded gallery—
 That lent broad verge to distant lands,
 Far as the wild swan wings.

We rode
 Till we could see the college lights
 Begin to glitter fire-fly like in copse
 And linden alley.

When we examine the masterpieces of the two poets with respect to their delineations of the human form or of the form of the gods and goddesses, we are at once struck by the influence of the one artist upon the other, and by the predominance of the sensuous element in both. In Tennyson's description of Venus,

Idalian Aphrodite beautiful,
 Fresh as the foam, new bathed in Paphian wells,
 With rosy slender fingers backward drew
 From her warm brows and bosom her deep hair
 Ambrosial, golden, round her lucid throat and shoulders—

or in that of Paris,

White breasted like a star
 Fronting the dawn he moved—

contrast the expressions "white-breasted," and "lucid throat" with that of "creamy breast" in

Soft dimpled hands, white neck and creamy breast,
 Are things on which the dazzled senses rest—

or with the "pearl-round ear," "orbed-brow," "blush-tinted cheeks," and "bluely-veined, whitely-sweet feet," with which Keats endows his goddess Diana.

Much has been written and still more spoken upon the mooted question of pictorial description, and this phase of the poetic art has been alternately extolled to the tingling stars and debased to the profoundest depths to which a bitter criticism could thrust it. We need not enter upon a discussion of its merits and demerits here. Suffice is to say that were all poetic descriptions deprived of their pictorial effects they would prove as bare and uninteresting as a beauteous summer garden robbed of its choicest flowers. Judge of the charm and the magic beauty that lies in these pictorial touches of Keats:

To his capable ears
Silence was music from the golden spheres.

One faint, eternal eventide of gems.

Tennyson was essentially a man of independent thought and original ideas. Nothing could have been more revolting to his moral and æsthetic principles than servile imitation. Yet, while those who accuse him of "unconscious plagiarism," do so with as fine a show of logical reasoning as Don Quixote displayed in his attack upon the proverbial windmills, it must be acknowledged that Tennyson did not hesitate to absorb and assimilate those beauties of the poet's art, and to examine those evidences of superior workmanship and technique which he encountered in study or stumbled upon in reading his favorite authors. Indeed, the beautiful examples of pictorial description with which the verses of Keats furnished him, inspired him to noble efforts in the same direction, and his unqualified successes therein are matters of such universal knowledge that the testimony of the following lines is well-nigh superfluous:

A spot of dull stagnation, without light
Or power of movement, seemed my soul.

The hollow orb of moving Circumstance
Rolled round by one fixed law.

The cold and starless road of Death.

Thus has Tennyson glorified commonplace facts by sublime pictures painted with impressive skill.

Tennyson's love of nature and his close observation of natural scenery have proved an endless theme for discussion, as well as an increasingly favorite object for his admirers' praise. It is a question that must remain unanswered to just what extent the Laureate's detailed descriptions were the result of an instinctive, analytic penetration, and in just what measure they were induced by a careful observation which did not become habitual until the poet's admiration had been drawn forth by the descriptive scenery of Wordsworth and Keats. One thing may be said in this connection. The lines

The seven elms and poplars four
That stood beside his father's door

have often been quoted as a striking example of Tennyson's power of detailed description—in "Alfred Tennyson," by Andrew Lang, for instance. To me they seem merely an instance of that deftness in the turning of a phrase, that primitive means of popularizing verse by pandering to an instinctive human delight in enumeration which Keats occasionally indulged in. Tennyson probably imitated it from the older poet. In "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" we find

And there I shut her wild, wild eyes
With kisses four.

This titillating pleasure which the sound of exact numbers affords us and which our emotional palates seem to crave is not overlooked by the clever rhymesters of the music hall, as a specimen from the "Bab Ballads" will show:

You have a daughter, Captain Reece,
Ten female cousins and a niece;
A ma, if what I'm told is true,
Six sisters and an aunt or two.

"Poplars four" and "kisses four," each is poetic, in its setting; "Ten female cousins" is burlesque. But the element of attractiveness in every one of these phrases is essentially identical.

We are not sufficiently conversant with the origin and history of Tennyson's poems to be able to describe the extent to which Keats influenced the younger poet's choice of theme. We do know that the influence, if any, was not tremendous. Tennyson could never bear to bring his Pegasus under yoke, nor did he ever attempt to confine his intellect to a narrow circle of ideas. On the contrary, he sang those strains to which the Muse inspired his soul, and although he avoided almost every temptation to compose occasional pieces, yet his verses embrace a very wide range of subjects and deal with almost every conceivable topic and tale of human interest. While the majority of Tennyson's themes were thus selected independently of the writings of others, some undoubtedly owed their selection to Tennyson's fondness for certain incidents which had already been developed by various poets. Suggestions of the "Lover's Tale" can be found in Keats' "Lamia;" and it seems not unlikely that when Tennyson had read "Hyperion" he sought for subjects on which he could exercise his unfledged skill in blank verse and test his progress in the attainment of form perfection. As we know, he found "Oenone" and "Ulysses." "The Lady of Shalott" might have been designed as a counter-portrait to the "wretched wight" in "La Belle Dame;" the "Ode to Memory" may have been suggested by the "Ode to Melancholy;" and the ballad of "Oriana" seems a strong reminiscence of Keats' splendid, weird ballad.

As in felicity of diction, in descriptive power and in melody of verse we can discern the influence of Keats upon Tennyson, so in harmony of plot and symmetry of form we can detect enough points of resemblance between the compositions of the two to warrant us in announcing the indebtedness of the one poet to the other. Wherever in English speaking countries Tennyson and Keats are appreciatively studied, boundless admiration is evinced for that Hellenic stateliness of outline and that Greek measure and moderation, which distinguish both poets and exalt them to a rank as masters of form unattainable by any one of their literary contemporaries. For no thoughtful student of modern European literature can fail to have observed the irregularity, the *Formlosigkeit*, to use a German word, which, during the past one hundred years, has been the most serious and universal failing of our

English men of letters. Among the greatest and most renowned of our novelists there is scarcely one who commands the intricacies of style and technique with the same skill that every third-rate story-teller in France can boast of; our dramatists, such as they are, are notoriously inferior to their Gallic brethren in unity of theme and in harmonious construction of plot; and our poets, no less than these, are lamentably deficient in that calm and classic grace, and that severe loveliness of outline, in the absence of which no French poet could ever gain national recognition or could so much as hope to emerge from the slough of mediocrity. This *Formlosigkeit*, however, which has long since been a target for continental shafts of derision, is a fault with which Keats, certainly, cannot be charged. Tennyson, on his side, was not slow to discover the crowning glory in Keats' diadem of beauties and was very quick to perceive that in Keats rather than in the French classicists the union of the modern and classical elements had been artistically effected. He was profoundly moved by the discovery that, in Keats alone, the life and freedom of the crude native material had not, as in France, been obliterated by an undue preponderance of the classical influence, but had rather been mellowed and chastened by Hellenic moderation and rendered majestic by Greek severity, grace and perfection of form.

Admiration for the grandeur of form in Keats was but an incentive by which Tennyson was spurred on to equal, if not to surpass the achievements of his master. A growing dissatisfaction with many of the earlier poems made itself felt, and the poet effected numerous radical alterations in the pieces published in 1833, before he permitted their republication in 1842. Notable among the poems thus amended are "Oenone," and "The Palace of Art," neither of which would possess its present stately beauty were it not for the chastening influence upon Tennyson of the example of Keats. Nor can the importance of this influence be overestimated. The Hellenic sentiment which had inspired the imagination of Keats became a permanent factor in the poetry of Tennyson, and was henceforth breathed into all his productions. It was then that the genius of the Victorian poet fully revealed itself; it was then that he created those radiant gems, which, like "The Dying Swan," "The Lady of Shalott," "Mariana

in the South," "The Palace of Art," "The Lotos Eaters," and the "Morte d'Arthur," form a resplendent galaxy that alone would suffice to immortalize his name, that dazzle and astound us with the exquisiteness of their expression as well as with the flawless perfection of their form.

In an essay concerned with the influence of one poet upon another, the writer labors under a serious disadvantage. Indisputable evidence or convincing facts in support of an affirmative position are more difficult to gather than violets in mid-winter, while probabilities and speculations may be marshalled forward in a most formidable array. Nor could it be otherwise. A great poet does not compose verses on which we can place our finger and say with positiveness, this stanza was imitated from Milton, and that one from Shakespeare. A poet of the highest order "imitates no one." He may, indeed, scrutinize, with a zealous fidelity, the models which genius has already created; and a broad-minded study of those models may shape anew his thought and expression, and radically alter the lines along which the development of his course would otherwise have proceeded. The youthful Tennyson commenced his career possessed of some power to produce melody, rhythm and color, and impressed with the profound conviction that destiny had assigned to him a grand and noble mission. In his heart he cherished the loftiest sentiments concerning the truly sublime poet, believing, with Milton, that he is both born and made; and, with respect to himself, he was not for one moment deluded into supposing that he had attained an absolute mastery of his art.

Indeed, a sense of his own imperfections drove him to a detailed study of the masters in the field of poetry and impelled him to subject their works to a rigorous, critical examination. With that inexplicable faculty which enables genius to absorb so readily whatever it may require to nurture and strengthen it, Tennyson profited in turn by the examples of Milton, of Wordsworth, of Shelley, and of Keats. To Keats, in particular, the Victorian Laureate was incalculably indebted. By him, as I have attempted to show, he was most powerfully influenced in the choice of subject-matter, in the perfect painting of nature, in the deft handling of metre and rhythm, and in the charm and simplicity of pictorial de-

scription. To Keats, above all things, he owed that delicate infusion of the classical element, and that Hellenic sentiment of delight in the bright and beautiful which gave measure and moderation to the products of his luxuriant fancy and added a stately classic grace to the exquisite music of his songs. Yet, be it well understood, no element of servile dependence characterized the relation in which Tennyson stood to Keats. The young Victorian may have learnt much from his lamented precursor, but he never stooped to make slavish copies. Externally, his verse may have undergone modifications; but, from the first, the soul which underlies them remained pure and free. And it is this soul which inspires and animates every poem, it is this soul which rejoices in its untrammelled freedom, and which, together with Keats and Spenser, exultantly inquires, "What more felicity can fall to creature, than to enjoy delight with liberty?"

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